Letter from Ben-Gurion to President Kennedy - Apr 26, 1963

Knowing as I do what a superhuman burden is imposed upon you by the conduct of the affairs of your own country as well as by your active concern for countries the world over, I refrain from taking up your valuable time even when I have matters of importance about which I would very much like to write to you. At this hour, however, I feel it my duty to turn to you because recent events have increased the danger of a serious conflagration in the Middle East and have adversely affected Israel's security. I do so because I am conscious of the interest the the American people has always evinced in the preservation of peace as well as in the welfare of Israel, but more particularly, because of your own personal interest of which I have been given signal proof in your conversation with me, in the personal and confidential letters you addressed to me last summer and in the talk you had with Foreign Minister Golda Meir in December of last year.

For many years now the rulers of the Arab States - Egypt, Syria, Iraq and others - have been making public declarations of their firm determination to obliterate Israel. I could fill quite a thick booklet with the pronouncements of rulers, army commanders, official newspapers and the radio stations of Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and other Arad capitals, on the destruction of Israel.

In recent days, something unique, I believe, in the history of nations has happened. On the 17th of April, a Treaty of Federation was signed in Cairo between three countries, Egypt, Syria aná Iraq. Before he put his signature to the treaty, the President of Egypt prayed to God for the success of the Federation. If the lord willed it, he said, this would be the parent federation of all the Arab states for the good of the Arab people.

If the Federation had as its sole objective the well-being of the Arab people, there would be many among us who, like wyself, would, with all their hearts, answer "Amen" to Nasser's prayer. For in our hearts there is no hatred towards the Arabs, despite the hatred of many of them for us.

The Treaty, however, has not as its only objective the good of the Arabs. It sets out in the following terms one of the central purposes of the Federation:

This union is basically a revolution, because it is very closely linked to the question of Palestine and the national obligation to liberate her. It was the disaster of Palestine which revealed the machinations of the reactionary circles, the treachery of the popular parties sold to foreign interests and their disregard for the aims and aspirations of the people.

It says later that the Federation is determined to establish a military union that will be in a position to liberate the Arab homeland from the Zionist danger and imperialism.

The Treaty makes no mention of Israel or the people of Israel. “ Palestine" and “her liberation" are the essence of the revolution. The meaning of this is clear.

This is, I believe, the first time that an official Arab constitutional document lays down as one of its objectives of principle the obliteration of Israel.

I do not know whether the signatories to the Treaty fully realize all the implications of this program.

The "liberation of Palestine" is impossible without the total destruction of the people in Israel. But the people of Israel are not in the hapless situation of the six million defenceless Jews who were wiped out by Nazi Germany. Despite the great superiority in manpower and arms (and the superiority in arms is both in quality and quantity) that these Arab States enjoy at present, I believe that in a test of strength, if such is inevitable, we can defeat all three - not without very serious losses of course.

For several reasons, however, I am not eager for such a victory:

a) It will solve nothing. It may be followed by a second and third round.

b) The cost to both sides will be very heavy.

c) It might have world-wide repercussions, the scope and significance of which I hesitate to spell out.

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It is difficult for me to imagine that the civilized world, of which your country and your Government are the leaders, will readily, without a pang of conscience, acquiesce in the "liberation" which the three Arab states have inscribed on their banner. On the other hand, it would be unpardonable irresponsibility to make light of this Treaty.

I recall Hitler's declaration to the world that one of his objectives was the destruction of the entire Jewish people. The civilized world, in Europe and America, treated this declaration with indifference and equanimity. A holocaust unequalled in human history was the result. Six million Jews in all the countries under Nazi occupation (except Bulgaria), men and women, old and young, infants and babies, were burned, strangled or buried alive.

Although the whole world is acquainted with the declaration of Nasser and the otherArab chiefs of their intention to wipe out Israel, Egypt nevertheless received assistance from many quarters.

The USSR has been supplying Egypt with weapons and equipment for her army, navy and air force for the past eight years. Her entire military doctrine is also of Russian origin.

At the same time, Egypt receives large-scale financial aid from several western countries - the U.S., Western Germany, and others. I am aware that financial aid granted by the United States (and other Western States) is meant to help in the economic development of the country and to improve the conditions of life of the Egyptian people. Indeed, if Egypt were not planning the annihilation of Israel, western financial aid could be regarded as a very positive action. However, in the present state of affairs, the aid serves, notwithstanding the good intentions of those who grant it, to set the Russian arms in motion against Israel when the opportunity offers.

For this reason, the most effective method of preventing the disaster of the "liberation of Palestine'' which is the essence of the Treaty of Federation of the three Arab States, is for the President of the United States and the Prime Minister

of the USSR to publish a declaration to the effect that they jointly guarantee the territorial integrity and security of every State in the Middle East; that any State that threatens her neighbours or declares that she is in a state of war with her or refuses to recognize her existence will receive no assistance of any kind - financial, political or other - from the two powers or, inasmuch as it depends on the two powers, from their allies or from other countries. A joint declaration of this kind, though not exactly in the same terms, was published on April 26, 1956 by Nikolai Bulganin, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and Nikita Krushchev then member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the one hand, and by Sir Anthony Eden, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Selwyn Lloyd, then British Foreign Minister, on the other.

This joint statement which dealt with Many international problems, had the following to say, inter alia, about the Near and Middle East:

The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union have the firm intention to do everything in their power to facilitate the maintenance of peace and security in the Near and Middle East. The governments of the two countries call on the states concerned to take measures to prevent the increase of tension in the area of the demarcation line established in accordance with the relevant armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab States.They will also support the United Nations in an initiative to secure a peaceful settlement on a mutually acceptable basis of the dispute between the Arab States and Israel.

Since this declaration made no provision for effective measures in case of aggression and did not insist upon the immediate cessation of Arab hostility against Israel, it did not lead to any practical result.

I am not sure that Mr. Krushchev will be ready to sign a declaration such as I envisage. Allow me to add, in all frankness, that I do not know whether you, Mr. President, will be prepared, for considerations of your own, to make such a proposal to Mr. Krushchev at the present time. If my suggestion is not feasible, then, I must emphasize, the situation in the Middle East assumes a gravity without parallel.

If you can spare an hour or two for discussion with me on the situation and possible solutions, I am prepared to fly to Washington at your convenience and without any publicity.

In conclusion, allow me to add one remark. I fully appreciate your decision to release the Hawk missiles to Israel, but I regret to say that this defensive weapon alone cannot serve as a deterrent to our neighbours. They are preparing weapons whose offensive potential cannot be reduced by the Hawk. The belief is growing in the hearts of our neighbours, rightly or wrongly, that Israel's defense army is no longer, or will very shortly no longer be, a deterrent force. The Arabs become increasingly confident that the hour for the "liberation of Palestine'' approaches.

The disaster which this "liberation" would involve, must be averted, for the sake of Israel, for the sake of the Arab people and for the sake of the world.

The Ambassador of Israel would appreciate the communication of this personal message to the President. The Ambassador of Israel avails himself of this opportunity to renew to the Honorable the Secretary of State the assurances of his highest consideration.

https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/5983554/National-Security-Archive-Doc-19-Prime-Minister.pdf